



Participatory Practices: Learning From Experience^{*}

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PARTICIPATORY EDUCATION SECTOR ASSESSMENT *Experience from El Salvador*¹

The Development Problem

The urgent need for concrete, reliable information and analysis upon which an incoming Salvadoran government could base educational policy in El Salvador led to USAID's decision to support a comprehensive education sector assessment. The assessment was carried out during a critical time in El Salvador's history, in late 1993, a year and a half after the Peace Agreement between the Government and the guerrillas, and six months before the general elections.

The Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID) was selected by USAID to manage the process. In addition to the Ministry of Education, HIID obtained the collaboration of two institutions with credibility among different political groups: the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) and an education foundation set up by the business community, the Foundation of Entrepreneurs for Educational Development (FEPADE).

The Practice: A Participatory Education Assessment

USAID conducted the education assessment in a participatory manner. One of the objectives of the assessment was to bring together groups in the private and public sectors, users and providers of educational services, and community members to generate a broad-based

USAID PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE is a series of studies of participatory approaches in USAID programs. They are intended to help staff consider similar approaches and further share experience. USAID's Participation Forum and GP-NET, an electronic conversation group, enable development practitioners worldwide to discuss problems and successes in the use of participation. For further information please e-mail Diane La Voy (DLAVOY@USAID.GOV) or Wendy Kapustin (WKAPUSTIN@USAID.GOV).

Kathleen Horkan and Wendy Kapustin drafted the following summary after extensive consultation with Cynthia Rohl, USAID/San Salvador and a thorough review of available project documentation.

dialogue regarding education policy. According to the Chief of Party for the assessment, Fernando Reimers, the assessment was a way to "open up space for education policy discussions among a wide range of people with different political views" (Vásquez de Barraza et al., 1994:4).

HIID, UCA, and FEPADE formed the technical team responsible for researching and writing the assessment. Twenty-two of the 35 technical advisors who wrote the assessment were Salvadorans.

To expand participation beyond the Technical Team, an Advisory Committee representing a broad spectrum of Salvadoran society was created to provide feedback during the assessment. USAID, HIID, FEPADE, and UCA invited approximately 50 representatives from 25 organizations to form the Advisory Committee, including representatives of ministries, research centers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), entrepreneurs, universities, teacher organizations, development agencies, professional associations, and special programs of the Ministry of Education. The Committee met weekly from October to December, 1993, to provide feedback and advice on the chapters of the assessment and the Technical Team's findings. It was made clear that the committee played an advisory role, and that reports might not necessarily represent a consensus of the Committee. After the first invitations were sent out to participate, USAID received several complaints from institutions that were not included. Those groups were subsequently invited and incorporated into the Committee.

The Ministry of Education was an important player in the process. Both officials and technical staff met with the technical team that wrote the assessments as well as provided information and logistical support. They reviewed, discussed, and commented on the assessment drafts as they were being prepared. In addition, the Minister of Education met with research teams every week for several hours during the months of the assessment process.

The sector assessment consisted of ten studies, each of which was conducted by a technical group made up of members from at least two of the three collaborating technical institutions (See the Resources Section of this paper for a list of the studies). Each of the ten technical groups organized focus groups with a larger network of practitioners. For example, the working group on the non-formal education chapter organized a three-day seminar to which more than 30 representatives of NGOs were invited. When the final sector assessment was completed, a series of meetings, workshops, and conferences was held to present and discuss the results of the study with the Advisory Committee, the media, political parties, non-governmental organizations, universities, and the general public.

Results

Participation was "vital in reinforcing the peace process, bringing together diverse groups previously fighting a civil war, and giving each a voice in a critical topic of national interest"

(Quote by Henry Reynolds, Acting Mission Director, USAID/San Salvador, in Vázquez de Barraza et al., 1994:4).

An important result of the assessment process was that it established the groundwork for a national policy dialogue on education. Several Salvadoran groups emerged as leaders to ensure that policy dialogue on educational issues continue. USAID, therefore, would be able to stay in the background and would not have to play a leading role in the dialogue or in creating local initiatives.

According to Edgardo Suarez, President of the Foundation of Entrepreneurs for Educational Development (FEPADE), the final assessment report, while insufficient alone to launch a rapid change in the education system, is valuable because it can "impress in the highest levels of decision making in the country that education in El Salvador should have the highest priority" (Vasquez et al. 1994:4). After the final report was presented to the presidential candidates, even the principal opposition candidate spoke on national news talking about some of the key themes and recommendations of the assessment.

In short, the assessment studies were valuable because they provided concrete, reliable information to the incoming Salvadoran Government, the private sector, and international donors working in education.

The participatory nature of the assessment made it possible for groups from different ends of the political spectrum to meet and discuss education and human resource development. Since the assessment was a collaborative effort, and USAID was not the only client or end-user of the assessment, Salvadorans felt that they had ownership over the process and the document; USAID, therefore, did not have to "sell" the report to Salvadoran constituencies.

As a result of the assessment, some changes took place in El Salvador. In June, 1994, the Ministry of Education initiated a major education reform at the primary and secondary levels, and proceeded to use the assessment in the "Consulta 95," a public information effort to draw attention to the state of education. A group of private businesses used the assessment to lobby for a law delegating responsibility for the delivery of technical training to the private sector. Several universities began programs of modernization based on analysis supported by the assessment, and various think tanks and universities in El Salvador sponsored workshops to discuss some of the chapters of the assessment. Other donors were also interested in using the document for their future assistance to El Salvador in education. The Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank announced that they would provide \$80 million to fund major policy changes for basic education reform in the country over five years starting in 1996. According to USAID/San Salvador, the vast majority of planned reform activities can be seen to have come directly from recommendations of the sector assessment as well as current successful educational projects and activities underway in El Salvador.

Discussion Points

- 1) The participatory nature of the assessment made it possible for groups from different ends of the political spectrum, and Salvadorans at different levels of society, to meet and discuss education and human resource development. Broad participation was vital for creating a sustainable dialogue on education.
- 2) The partnerships which Harvard established with Salvadoran institutions--FEPADE, UCA, and various directorates of the Ministry of Education--provided opportunities for host-country participation.
- 3) Recognizing that the education assessment was to be disseminated widely, reports were written in Spanish rather than English. Project staff spent little time in USAID offices. Instead, most of the time was spent in the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Planning, and with members of the Advisory Committee and various consultative groups.
- 4) The formation of an Advisory Committee helped to link technical analysis and policy dialogue. An important objective of the sector assessment was to "help stakeholders construct a shared set of understandings about the education problems and policy options facing the country" (Vásquez de Barraza et al., 1994:6).

VI. Resources

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